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ABSTRACT

Testing reading by testing the bits and pieces of reading leads to teaching the bits and pieces instead of teaching reading. Reading is a total skill rather than a subject, and a skill can best be tested by performance. Some of the purposes for reading tests include showing test score improvement, diagnosis, satisfying parents, grouping or sorting students for instructional purposes, and comparing students across time or areas for purposes of funding. Some tests include ones by the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) and the California Assessment Program (CAP). The CAP cannot obtain results for an individual student but gives estimates of the total school program. It heavily emphasizes comprehension. Other appropriate measures of reading are: how many books are checked out of the school library; how many books are written, published, purchased, and read; and how many hours students spend reading at home. (TJ)

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RAISING READING SCORES: THE RIGHT WAY AND THE WRONG WAY FOR CONTINUED SUCCESS

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Mt. Diablo Unified Schools

WHICH COMES FIRST, THE READING TEST OR READING INSTRUCTION? TESTS AND THE TEACHING OF READING FEED EACH OTHER AND TEND TO BECOME CIRCULAR LIKE THE CHICKEN AND THE EGG. OFTEN THE CIRCLE BECOMES INGROWN AND EVOLVES IN SUCH A WAY THAT THERE IS ONLY A VESTIGIAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOL READING INSTRUCTION AND WHAT PEOPLE DO WHEN THEY READ. EDUCATORS, BEING MOSTLY INTELLIGENT PEOPLE, TEND TO ANALYZE THE PROCESS THEY ARE ASKED TO TEACH, TO TAKE IT APART INTO ITS BITS AND PIECES IN ORDER THAT TEACHING WILL SEEM LESS COMPLEX, AND THEN BUILD IT BACK TO THE WHOLE. THIS WORKS IN A QUITE LOGICAL PATTERN WITH MOST INSTRUCTION, BUT I'M REMINDED OF THE ANONYMOUS AUTHOR WHO WROTE:

"THE CENTIPEDE WAS HAPPY QUITE
UNTIL THE FROG IN FUN
SAID, "PRAY, WHICH LEG COMES AFTER WHICH?"
THIS WROUGHT HIM UP TO SUCH A PITCH
HE LAY DISTRACTED IN A DITCH
CONSIDERING HOW TO RUN!"

READING IS MUCH LIKE THE CENTIPEDE RUNNING. IT IS MUCH MORE THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS. NILA BANTON SMITH ONCE LIKENED IT TO FASTENING A SNAP ON THE BACK OF A UNION SUIT WHILE TURNING AROUND. READING IS PURE COMPLEXITY. IT NEEDS TO BE TREATED AS A WHOLE. TESTING THE WHOLE WITH ALL ITS PARTS THEN BECOMES THE TASK, AND YET WE NEEDN'T "LAY DISTRACTED IN A DITCH" CONSIDERING HOW TO TEST READING. WE DO NEED TO CONSIDER, HOWEVER, WHAT NOT TO DO. IF WE FOLLOW OUR PENCHANT FOR LOGIC AND TEST THE BITS AND PIECES OF READING WE WILL ALSO LOGICALLY NEED TO TEACH THOSE BITS AND PIECES THAT WILL BE TESTED. TEST

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SCORES ON A TEST THAT MATCHES THE "BITS AND PIECES"-KIND OF TEACHING WILL RISE, TEACHING WILL BE REINFORCED, TEACHERS, STUDENTS AND PARENTS WILL BE PLEASED. THEN DOWN THE ROAD A WAYS, USUALLY ABOUT GRADE FOUR, THE REALIZATION DAWNS THAT THE STUDENTS HAVE NO IDEA WHAT THEY ARE READING. THE WHOLE, THE PROCESSING OF MEANING, HAS ESCAPED THEM IN THE CONCENTRATED EFFORT TO LEARN TO REPRODUCE SOUNDS AND WORDS.

READING IS A SKILL RATHER THAN A SUBJECT, AND AS A SKILL IT IS BEST LEARNED THROUGH PRACTICE MUCH LIKE SWIMMING, RIDING A BICYCLE, OR DRIVING A CAR. TO TEST KNOWLEDGE OF A SUBJECT, THE TESTER CAN ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT IT. TO TEST A SKILL, THE TESTER MUST TEST PERFORMANCE. ONE WOULD NOT TEST A SWIMMER FOR LIFE SAVING ABILITY BY ASKING ONLY IF THAT SWIMMER HAD LEARNED TO PUT HIS OR HER HEAD IN THE WATER. ONE WOULD NOT TEST THE DRIVER OF A CAR FOR DRIVING ABILITY UNTIL THE DRIVER HAD HAD ON-THE-ROAD EXPERIENCE. THE DRIVING TEST PROBABLY WOULD NOT SPEND MUCH, IF ANY, TIME ON WHETHER OR NOT THE DRIVER KNEW THE BRAKES FROM THE GEAR SHIFT. THIS ELEMENTARY INFORMATION IS ASSUMED TO BE KNOWN IF THE TEST RESULTS INDICATE THAT THE PERSON CAN HANDLE THE CAR SAFELY ON THE ROAD.

LIKEWISE, READING TESTS SHOULD CERTIFY THAT READERS CAN UNDERSTAND WRITTEN ITEMS IN OUR WORLD SUCH AS ADVERTISEMENTS, APPLICATIONS, NEWSPAPERS, LETTERS, BILLS, AND BALLOTS, RATHER THAN RECOGNIZING DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE LONG AND SHORT "E".

THERE ARE SEVERAL HOMILIES THAT SHOULD BE STATED HERE. A SYLLOGISM OF LOGIC, IF YOU WILL:

CHILDREN LEARN TO READ BY SPENDING TIME READING.

(TIME SPENT READING CORRELATES WITH SUCCESS IN LEARNING TO READ.)

PEOPLE TEND TO SPEND TIME DOING THAT WHICH THEY ENJOY DOING.

(AND CONVERSELY, THEY AVOID DOING THAT AT WHICH THEY FIND NO SUCCESS.)

THEREFORE: IF CHILDREN ENJOY READING, THEY WILL HAVE SUCCESS IN LEARNING TO READ.

THE PROBLEM IS ALMOST AS SIMPLE AS THE ABOVE, AND I AM MINDFUL OF THE WISE WORDS OF H. L. MENCKEN WHO CAUTIONED THAT FOR EVERY COMPLEX PROBLEM THERE IS A SOLUTION THAT IS SIMPLE, DIRECT, AND WRONG. HOW THEN TO ASSESS THE PROCESS OF LEARNING TO READ IN A WAY THAT WILL GIVE US RESULTS TO MATCH THIS HOLISTIC, SIMPLISTIC, PURE COMPLEXITY CALLED READING?

LET US EXPLORE SOME PURPOSES FOR ASSESSING READING INSTRUCTION AND SOME OF THE ASSESSMENT TOOLS THAT HAVE BEEN DEVISED TO ACHIEVE THOSE PURPOSES. IN PARTICULAR LET US EXAMINE WAYS OF USING THE RESULTS OF THE CALIFORNIA ASSESSMENT PROGRAM (CAP) TO IMPROVE READING INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS.

WHY ASSESS READING?

IF OUR PURPOSE IN MEASURING READING IS TO SHOW TEST SCORE IMPROVEMENT WE MIGHT WANT TO CONSIDER GIVING EACH STUDENT SOMETHING SWEET TO EAT ABOUT TEN MINUTES BEFORE THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE TEST. RAISING THE BLOOD SUGAR LEVEL HAS SHOWN TO BE EFFECTIVE IN RAISING TEST SCORES. WILDLY FLUCTUATING BLOOD SUGAR LEVELS, OF COURSE, IS COUNTER PRODUCTIVE TO A GOOD LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND CAN WRECK HAVOC ON THE BIOLOGIC SYSTEM, BUT IT CAN RAISE TEST SCORES, AT LEAST VERY TEMPORARILY. ANOTHER EFFECTIVE WAY TO ACHIEVE TEST SCORE IMPROVEMENT IS THE COMMON SYSTEM OF PRETEST IN THE FALL AND POST-TEST IN THE SPRING THAT IS DESIGNED TO SHOW GROWTH FOR THE YEAR CALCULATED IN MONTHLY INCREMENTS. IN THIS SYSTEM, THE SUBTLETIES OF ATTITUDE IN BOTH THE TEST TAKER AND TEST GIVER ARE ENOUGH TO RAISE THE TEST SCORE DIFFERENCES TO A "SUCCESSFUL" LEVEL. THIS REPEATS OVER THE YEARS WITH THE FALL SCORES DEPRESSED AND THE SPRING SCORES

ELEVATED. IF THE QUESTION ARISES ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS TO THESE STUDENTS FROM SPRING TO FALL, IT IS RATIONALIZED TO FACTORS OF MOBILITY OR TO FORGETTING OVER THE SUMMER. IF THE ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVE IS TO OBTAIN OR RETAIN FUNDING, THIS MAY WELL BE A TEST SYSTEM TO FOLLOW, BUT UNDERSTAND THAT THE PURPOSE IS FOR FUNDING. ANOTHER EFFECTIVE WAY TO RAISE TEST SCORES IS TO DESIGN THE TEST AND THE INSTRUCTION AROUND BITS AND PIECES THAT ARE EASY TO DEFINE AND TEACH. READING IS NEITHER. IF WE WANT TO BE CONSIDERED EDUCATORS RATHER THAN COSMETOLOGISTS, WE MUST DISCARD THESE RELATIVELY EASY PATHS TO RAISING TEST SCORES, JUST AS WE HAVE LONG SINCE RECOGNIZED THAT TEACHING TO THE TEST GIVES RESULTS THAT LOOK GOOD BUT THAT ARE NOT A TRUE MEASURE OF THE STUDENT'S ABILITY TO PERFORM IN READING.

DO WE MEASURE READING IN ORDER TO DETERMINE THE NEED FOR SKILL INSTRUCTION? DIAGNOSIS IS THE POPULAR TERM HERE, BUT BE CAREFUL. ARE WE TO DIAGNOSE HOLISTICALLY OR ONLY THE PARTS OF READING THAT DO NOT NECESSARILY ADD UP TO THE WHOLE? SOME OF THE MOST POPULAR TESTS OF READING HAVE BEEN DESIGNED TO TEST THE SKILLS FOUND IN SOME OF THE MOST POPULAR READING TEXTBOOKS, WHICH WERE DESIGNED TO TEACH THE SKILLS FOUND IN THE SPECIFICATIONS OF THE MOST POPULAR READING TESTS. IT IS SOMETIMES ARGUED AMONG TEST MAKERS THAT A SKILL MUST BE TESTED BECAUSE IT IS WHAT MOST SCHOOLS TEACH. IN SUCH A PROGRAM, READING CAN BE DEFINED AS "THAT WHICH IS TAUGHT IN SCHOOL" RATHER THAN "A MEANING GAINING PROCESS." [2]

TEACHERS DO NEED TO HAVE AN ALMOST CONTINUOUS KNOWLEDGE OF WHAT EACH STUDENT IS ABLE TO DO AND WHAT NEEDS TO BE TAUGHT. THEY MAY LISTEN TO STUDENTS READ AND THEN DISCUSS INFERENCES AND EXPLORE THE RAMIFICATIONS OF AN AUTHOR'S IDEAS. THIS PROCEDURE WHICH TESTS THE COMPLEXITY OF READING IN ITS PUREST FORM, HAS BEEN CODIFIED AND BROUGHT TO FOCUS IN THE <u>READING MISCUE INVENTORY</u>.[3] TEACHERS

ARE ALSO FINDING CLOZE TESTS USEFUL AS DEVICES TO DETERMINE WHETHER STUDENTS ARE READING A PARTICULAR PASSAGE FOR MEANING OR ONLY FOR WORDS OR SOUNDS. CLOZE TESTS ARE TESTS OF THE PURE COMPLEXITY OF READING AND AS SUCH SHOULD NOT BE USED TO ANALYZE KNOWLEDGE OF SUB SKILLS OR THE BITS AND PIECES OF READING, THOUGH CORRELATION STUDIES WITH TESTS OF SUB-SKILLS MAY BE QUITE INTERESTING. CLOZE TESTS MEASURE COMPETENCE IN PROCESSING A GIVEN PIECE OF MATERIAL BY ASKING A STUDENT TO READ A REWRITTEN PASSAGE THAT HAS HAD EVERY FIFTH WORD OMITTED. BY FILLING IN THE MISSING WORDS, THE STUDENT DEMONSTRATES COMPETENCE IN SEVERAL SKILLS OF GAINING MEANING FROM READING.

PARENT SATISFACTION CAN SOMETIMES BE A REASON FOR ASSESSING THE LEVEL OF READING SUCCESS. IF THE CHILD READS AT HOME AND OBVIOUSLY ENJOYS READING, PARENTS ARE USUALLY QUITE SATISFIED AND OFTEN BECOME STRONG SCHOOL SUPPORTERS. OCCASIONALLY, PARENTS WILL ASK WHETHER THEIR FIFTH GRADE CHILD IS READING ON A FIFTH GRADE LEVEL, BUT THAT CAN BE ANSWERED AS IT WAS BY A PAMPHLET ISSUED BY RIGHT TO READ (4) ASSURING PARENTS THAT ALL THEY HAD TO DO WAS TO LOOK AT THE NUMBER LABELING THE TEXTBOOK THE CHILD WAS READING. THAT MUST NOT BE MADE TO SOUND AS FLIPPANT AS IT AT FIRST SEEMS. SOMEHOW WE MUST HELP THE PUBLIC TO KNOW THAT OUR GRADE LEVEL LADDER IS NOT AS ABSOLUTE A HIERARCHY AS PEOPLE SEEM TO ASSUME. READABILITY SCALES, AND CONSEQUENTLY THE READABILITY ASSIGNED TO GRADE LEVELS, VARY WIDELY. CHILDREN DO LEARN TO READ AT DIFFERENT RATES, AND THEY ARE ABLE TO HANDLE MATERIALS AT VARIOUS LEVELS OF DIFFICULTY AT DIFFERENT TIMES. THIS NEEDS TO BE COMMUNICATED TO PARENTS IN AN UNDERSTANDABLE AND REASONABLE FASHION. OUR CREDIBILITY IS AT STAKE. BEING PRECISE WHEN PRECISION DOES NOT EXIST DOES NOT HELP OUR CAUSE.

READING ASSESSMENT ALSO MAY BE UNDERTAKEN FOR THE PURPOSE OF GROUPING OR SORTING STUDENTS. SURELY WE ARE NOT STILL USING ACHIEVEMENT AS CRITERIA FOR ASSIGNING MORNING AND AFTERNOON READING GROUPS OR FOR GROUPS CALLED BLUEBIRDS, REDBIRDS

REDBIRDS AND SQUIRRELS. STUDENTS GROUPED WITH THE SQUIRRELS, AND THOSE PUT IN OTHER REMEDIAL CLASSES, WHATEVER THEIR NAMES, SOON LEARN THAT READING IS NOT WHERE THEY FIND SUCCESS, BUT RATHER A PLACE WHERE FAILURE IS ASSIGNED. STUDENTS IN SUCH ASSIGNED GROUPS BEGIN TO DEVELOP TECHNIQUES, SOME VERY SOPHISTICATED, THAT ENABLE THEM TO AVOID READING. IF READING IS LEARNED BY READING, THEN GROUPS AND LABELS MUST NOT GET IN THE WAY. SELF FULLFILLING PROPHESIES INDEED SEEM TO OPERATE IN REMEDIAL READING GROUPS. FOR INSTANCE, JOHNSON FOUND THAT ALTHOUGH BOYS OUTNUMBER GIRLS IN REMEDIAL READING GROUPS IN THE U.S. AND CANADA, QUITE THE OPPOSITE IS TRUE IN ENGLAND AND IN NIGERIA. (5) COULD THE FACT THAT LITERACY RANKS HIGHER IN PUBLIC ESTEEM IN ENGLAND AND NIGERIA CREATE THE ENVIRONMENT THAT FULLFILLS THE PROPHESY OF LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT IN BOYS AND GIRLS?

SOME ASSESSMENT IS DONE TO COMPARE STUDENTS OF TODAY WITH THOSE OF YESTERDAY, OR THOSE FROM CALIFORNIA WITH OTHERS FROM MICHIGAN. THE STATE AND THE NATION NEED TO KNOW COMPARATIVE INFORMATION FOR DEMOGRAPHIC AND FOR FUNDING PURPOSES. GETTING THE INFORMATION NEED NOT DISRUPT THE TEACHING/LEARNING PROCESS SINCE THIS INFORMATION IS NOT PARTICULARLY HELPFUL IN THE CLASSROOM. THE NATIONAL ASSESSMENT FOR EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS (NAEP) HAS SHOWN PROMISE IN GETTING INFORMATION ON LANGUAGE SKILLS FOR PUBLIC USE BY SAMPLING GEOGRAPHIC AND AGE GROUPINGS THROUGHOUT THE UNITED STATES. EACH YEAR COMPARISONS ARE REPORTED IN THE POPULAR PRESS.

THE CALIFORNIA ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

THE CALIFORNIA ASSESSMENT PROGRAM (CAP), FIRST ADMINISTERED STATEWIDE IN CALIFORNIA IN 1974-75, WAS DESIGNED TO ANSWER COMPARISON QUESTIONS ABOUT READING IN CALIFORNIA. THE CAP TESTS READING IN GRADES 2, 3, 6, AND 12 IN A SYSTEM OF MATRIX SAMPLING. ALL STUDENTS AT A GRADE LEVEL ARE TESTED, BUT EACH STUDENT

TAKES ONLY A PORTION OF THE TOTAL TEST, THUS REQUIRING NO MORE THAN 30 MINUTES. RESULTS FOR AN INDIVIDUAL STUDENT CANNOT BE DETERMINED, BUT QUITE ACCURATE ESTIMATES OF THE TOTAL SCHOOL PROGRAM ARE OBTAINED AND ARE RETURNED TO EACH SCHOOL IN A FORMAT THAT IS QUITE EASILY USED FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT PURPOSES. SINCE THE CAP IS ADMINISTERED EACH SPRING, LONGITUDINAL PROGRAM INFORMATION IS ALSO AVAILABLE. ONLY TOTAL GRADE LEVEL DATA IS COLLECTED; THEREFORE, CAP HAS AN ADVANTAGE OF BEING NONJUDGEMENTAL OF INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS AND CLASSROOMS. THE TEST IS CURRENTLY BEING MODIFIED TO MORE NEARLY ASSESS THE PURE COMPLEXITY OF READING WITH A HEAVY EMPHASIS ON COMPREHENSION. SPECIFICATIONS, AVAILABLE FROM THE STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION IN SACRAMENTO, ARE BASED ON THE STATE FRAMEWORK IN READING, (2) AND WERE USED AS THE MODEL FOR THE SUGGESTIONS FOR THE PROFICIENCY TEST. GRADES 8 AND 10 IN THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM SCHOOLS UNDER AB 65 WILL BE ASSESSED THIS YEAR FOR THE FIRST TIME WITH THE NEW CAP.

THERE ARE, OF COURSE, OTHER QUITE APPROPRIATE MEASURES OF READING THAT SHOULD NOT BE OVERLOOKED. IT MAY HELP IN PROGRAM EVALUATION TO KNOW HOW MANY BOOKS ARE CHECKED OUT OF THE SCHOOL LIBRARY EACH MONTH OR YEAR. AS A MEASURE OF READING ENJOYMENT, A FREE PERIOD OF CLASS TIME MAY BE GIVEN TO MEASURE HOW MANY STUDENTS CHOOSE TO USE THAT TIME TO READ, BOTH BEFORE AND AFTER A YEAR OF INSTRUCTION. A TALLY MAY BE MADE OF THE HOURS STUDENTS SPEND READING AT HOME. TIME SPENT IN OUTSIDE READING MAY WELL BE AN INSTRUCTIONAL GOAL AND CAN BE MEASURED.

SINCE TESTS, INSTRUCTION AND LEARNING ARE BOUND TOGETHER, IT IS IMPORTANT THAT WE KNOW ALL OF OUR OPTIONS IN ASSESSING READING. WHO IS TO BE TESTED: INDIVIDUALS, CLASSROOMS, SCHOOLS, DISTRICT, STATE, OR NATION? FOR WHAT OBJECTIVES WILL TESTS BE USED: SCORE IMPROVEMENT, FUNDING, SKILL MASTERY, GROUPING, COMPARING, PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT, INSTRUCTION? HOW BEST CAN THIS ASSESSMENT BE MADE: DIRECTLY

OR INDIRECTLY WITH STUDENT ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS, BY STUDENT PERFORMANCE, BY SAMPLING, BY UNOBTRUSIVE EVIDENCE? ALL OF THESE ARE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO ANSWER IF WE ARE TO HAVE ANY CONTINUING SUCCESS IN THE IMPROVEMENT OF READING FOR STUDENTS WHO WILL LEARN TO READ AND WILL CONTINUE TO READ THROUGHOUT LIFE.

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